

## **READING ALOUD**

My Creative Writing class had settled down to workshop the shy young woman's first chapter. 'Speak up,' came from the back of the room. 'We can't hear.'

'Yes,' others cried. 'We can't hear.'

Though I stood only two paces away, I still had to strain my ears. I knew that this young woman wrote delightful prose. I hoped that one day she would get her first Young Adult book out in print. But what would happen to her when the publisher demanded that she read her work in public? Or worse still, be asked to speak about her writing to a critical teenage audience?

'Thus is wonderful stuff,' I said trying hard not to be too confrontational. 'But some of our class are having trouble hearing you. Please read a little louder.'

Head down and scarlet faced she did - though the words were still unintelligible.

The class shifted uneasily. This session was going nowhere. In desperation, I said, 'Would you like someone else to take over?'

Openly relieved, she handed me her work. I read it through very slowly. Only then was the class able to offer her some important and constructive advice.

In an age when voices spruik from every corner, and when music is most public places is either mind-blowingly bland or ear-deafeningly noisy, reading aloud is a forgotten skill. I have attended too many Writers' Festivals and Readings where the audience was flummoxed by a general

lack of correct enunciation, and where the experience ended up as a frustrating waste of time.

But there is another and more immediate reason for reading one's work aloud. Writers need to hear their own words, if only to acquire the right tempo and phrasing. How easy it is when tapping on a computer to rattle away and not be aware that sentences are overlong, convoluted, repetitive or just plain boring. I taught high school English before I became a full time writer. Back then I would instruct my young students to read their work to a sibling or parent before putting it in for assessment. I'd say, 'You'll hear the mistakes. They'll jump out at you. Promise.'

'But miss, they won't listen.'

'Then go into the bathroom and read your work to the toilet. The toilet will listen.'

This always aroused great mirth. But I had made my point, and the students would bring in wonderful essays and stories that proved they had actually listened to their own words.

How sad that so few people know how to read aloud and make the experience pleasant for both reader and listener. Reading is the other side of acting. A writer should be able to present his characters well enough to show changes of atmosphere, setting and plot. Reading aloud is very different to silent reading - particularly for rapid eye readers which I suspect most writers are. But it's hard to remember to slow down enough for each phrase to sink in; to remember to pause between sentences; to emphasize questions and exclamations; to allow pregnant pauses between chapters; to give each character some unique tonal quality.

Reading your work over community radio is one way of honing your technique. Community radios often have segments for new writers' works and are usually happy to provide airspace. There's nothing like listening to yourself on playback to allow the message of careful slow reading to sink in. I have often read a new piece of work into a tape recorder or over radio only to realise how much more editing was needed. The experience can be most salutary. And don't forget your local school. Schools love writers coming in to read their work. Those young listeners are highly critical, and you will soon learn when your work is overlong, or boring or not correctly pitched to your audience.

Thank heavens for audio books. They are another way of reaching a wider audience as busy folk work, walk, cycle and drive. Only I sometimes find that even professional readers speak too quickly when they have to compete with noisy traffic. Just like less can be more, maybe slow can be faster?